

## Is There a Global Jewish Politics?

Michael Galchinsky

Jewish associations are essentially voluntary and have been since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Their decision-making is neither top-down nor a result of a participatory bottom-up process. On the political level each brings its own constituency and mission to the table. So, when it comes to global Jewish politics there is an alphabet soup of organizations and individuals participating in the decision-making process.

Their kaleidoscopic interrelations can resemble independent action, coordination, competition, or conflict, and have prevented a unified Jewish response to *most* political questions. Instead, we find a dynamic *system* of responses based on ever-changing relationships among multiple power centres.

How this fragile and fluid coalition politics evolved can be seen by reflecting on three human rights challenges where Jews have been particularly active. *Building international human rights institutions*: Organizations cooperated informally and each national organization contributed significantly to the process, but at times they opposed each other. *Defending vulnerable Jewish communities*: Internal cooperation and conflict were especially evident in the campaigns for Soviet Jewry and Ethiopian Jewry. Many organizations were active and some pursued distinctly different agendas. Their success could not be credited to the network's internal cohesion. *Working for the relief of victims of Israeli human rights violations*: Israel's 20-year old human rights network is characterized by informality, collaboration and conflict—and no permanent alliances. Differences have led to failures, but also have contributed to successes.

Being aware of the fluid pattern by which global Jewish politics typically operates prompts the question: How will global Jewish politics be managed in the future? This can be divided into three parts: Who sets the global agenda? Does the decision-making process still work? What issues need collective action?

The busy, buzzing hive of associations should be seen as a sign of the robust health of global Jewish civil society. Those of us who hope to influence Jewish public policy need first of all to understand how the Jewish people works.

Phrases like 'the Jewish people' or 'world Jewry' suggest a certain harmony of outlook and purpose among Jews around the globe.<sup>1</sup> Organizations like the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute in Jerusalem, the World Jewish Congress, the Consultative Council of Jewish Organizations and Jewish World Watch have either explicitly or implicitly made the case that Jews in Israel and the Diaspora share, or can share, certain public policy orientations. Yet how unified have global Jewish political projects really been?

### A voluntary, kaleidoscopic structure

Ever since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century when Jews were first invited to look beyond their legally incorporated communities and to make the transition from aliens to citizens, the basic condition of Jewish life in liberal democracies has been that participation is voluntary. Although Jews are bound together by familial, communal, ethnic, religious and national ties, they are no longer bound by state law to remain Jews. Exit always looms as an option, which means Jews in liberal democracies are now to a large degree Jews by choice—to whatever extent they find congenial. The fundamentally vol-

untary nature of Jews' association has profoundly influenced the form of their political behaviour and the substance of their policy orientations. Modern Jews do not generally engage in a formal, top-down decision-making process—there is no *Sanhedrin* (the supreme religious body in ancient Israel), *Bet Din* (rabbinical court), or *kehilla* (Jewish community). But neither do they engage in a participatory, bottom-up process by which individual Jews would be polled to find consensus issues. Instead, modern Jews organize their politics through a variety of associations, none of which represents the whole, and each of which brings its own constituency and mission to the table.

We see the beginnings of this complex, multipolar structure already developing at the start of the nineteenth century. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), like the

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<sup>1</sup> For most references see my book, *Jews and Human Rights: Dancing at Three Weddings* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

Board of Deputies of British Jews, formed to seek civil rights for Jews at home and to protect vulnerable Jewish communities abroad. From that point on, Jews developed a vigorous voluntary sector that has included religious denominations; political, cultural, and religious Zionist groups; Yiddish socialists and Bundists; and still later, human rights NGOs. Then there is the broad stratification among Israel's political bodies, whether driven by ethnic or national origin; religious or ideological outlook; specializations or tactics; capacity, funding, or influence.

When it comes to global Jewish politics there is an alphabet soup of organizations and individuals participating in the decision-making process. The bewildering variety of associations can elicit consternation even from insiders, creating kaleidoscopic interrelations that can resemble independent action, coordination, competition, or conflict. The existence of such a vast array of associations—occupying the intermediate space between oligarchic and participatory politics—has typically prevented a unified Jewish response to *most* political questions. Instead, we find a dynamic *system* of responses based on ever-changing relationships among multiple power centres. Political activity generally emerges through a non-contractual, push-pull process among actors who choose to join time-limited, strategic alliances on particular issues. Jewish media outlets and internet sites emerge to provide forums for voluntary groups to become informed about each other's aims and activities and argue their positions. Quasi-diplomatic 'summits' among NGOs, or between NGOs and the Israeli government, try to hammer out agreements. Action results from intense intra-communal negotiations and, in some cases, outright struggle.

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In other words, there are not now, nor have there ever been any Elders of Zion.

#### The evolution of global Jewish political projects

How has this fragile and fluid coalition politics evolved? What purposes has it served? Does the *ad hoc* nature of this system benefit or constrain Jews? What has it meant—what *can* it mean—to be a politically active modern Jew?

We may begin to form a picture of how global Jewish political projects evolved by looking to specific historical cases. I will draw my examples from a field of Jewish political activity that has encompassed both state and non-state actors: post-Holocaust human rights activism. I want to reflect on three human rights challenges with respect to which Jews have been particularly active: building the institutions of international human rights, defending vulnerable Jewish communities and working for the relief of victims of Israeli human rights vio-

lations. Together, these cases will enable us to form a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the global Jewish political network.

#### Building the human rights system

My first example involves those Jewish NGOs that worked to build the international human rights system in the 1940s and 1950s. NGOs like the World Jewish Congress, the British and South African Boards of Deputies, the American Jewish Committee, B'nai B'rith and the International Council of Jewish Women cooperated in promoting the inclusion of human rights in the UN Charter, drafting treaties and promoting ratification and advocating on behalf of ethnic and religious minorities, refugees, displaced persons and victims of genocide. As a report of the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations put it in its 1950 'Report of Activities':

CBJO has from time to time worked with...the Consultative Council of Jewish Organizations and the World Jewish Congress in respect of matters of common interest, such as human rights, problems of Jewish war orphans, and such. Although there is no formal agreement or system of coordination, a considerable degree of cooperation exists on an *ad hoc* basis among consultants for Jewish consultative organizations.<sup>2</sup>

Two decades later, Sidney Liskofsky, the founding director of the American Jewish Committee's human rights arm in 1972, was still describing Jewish NGOs' collaborative work in similar terms:

Though the Jewish representatives...have no formal coordinating machinery, they consult informally, and often coordinate activities....

In our initiatives on matters of Jewish concern, without having made any formal decision to do so, we instinctively wait for, or encourage, one or another non-Jewish group to take the lead—and then hasten to offer our cooperation. The advantages of this are obvious.<sup>3</sup>

This informal arrangement was, paradoxically, the product of careful negotiations. After the UN was established, the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations and the American Jewish Conference proposed the formation of a Council of Jewish Delegations, with an Executive governing the whole organization. This would have provided a much more formal structure than actually emerged. But the World Jewish Congress rejected the proposal because it wanted to position itself as the sole voice of world Jewry. The WJC filed alone for consultative status with the UN, arguing that it should be the only Jewish NGO to be able to make oral and written submissions

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Bernstein, 'Report of Activities of the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations,' 1 January 1949 to 20 June 1950, CBJO Collection, MS 76/1/1, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Sidney Liskofsky to Bert Gold, 3 Feb. 3, 1971, Bert Gold Memos—70-71, FAD-IO, American Jewish Committee Archives, Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Research Library.

to the world body: if it had been successful, the practical effect would have been that all Jewish organizations would have had to make proposals through the WJC.

As it was, WJC's separate action caused the other Jewish NGOs to form their own alliances for consultative status. As a result, although all Jewish NGOs shared information informally and all made instrumental contributions to building the institutional infrastructure of the human rights system, in the first years of the UN they managed to issue only one joint memorandum, on the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. In some instances, the organizations opposed one another. To take just one example, the WJC was active in drafting the provisions in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights regarding the prohibition of incitement to racial or religious discrimination. Based in London, the WJC's position on incitement grew out of post-war European legal thinking about hate speech. As lawyers in the American legal tradition, however, the American Jewish Committee's staff worried that a prohibition on incitement would infringe on the rights of free speech, press and assembly. Differing national contexts could produce different Jewish understandings of the human rights mission.

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#### Protecting vulnerable Jewish communities

Perhaps the most prominent cases of Jewish internal cooperation and conflict have developed in instances where human rights activists coalesced to protect vulnerable Jewish communities. The best known such effort was the movement to free Soviet Jewry. A largely non-contractual network developed that included Soviet Jewish activists, international and state-based NGOs, the Israeli, Dutch, and US governments, and high-powered individuals. Each of these actors brought its own strengths and mission to the network.

Among Jewish activists in the USSR there were three distinct camps. Some were animated by a belief in the international human rights to freedom of movement and emigration. These activists worked with non-Jewish dissidents like Andrei Sakharov to persuade the Soviet government to apply international human rights norms within the USSR. A second group was driven less by human rights than by the Zionist idea of ingathering, rejecting human rights activism because they believed that arguing for Jews' rights alongside the rights of other groups—Crimean Tartars, Lithuanian Catholics, Volga Germans—would only dilute the Jewish cause in a pool of other causes. A third group worked, not for international rights or *aliyah* (emigration to Israel), but for legal and social space to support internal religious and cultural freedoms. Hence Soviet Jews were split among supporters of internationalism, Jewish nationalism and cultural pluralism. All three

groups collaborated on occasion but also exhibited bitter disagreements from time to time.

Among *international* groups working on behalf of Soviet Jewry, a pattern of coordination and conflict also developed. NGOs and the Israeli government's Liaison Bureau worked together informally on conferences and symposia, petitions, lobbying efforts, transit and absorption efforts and fundraising. Yet questions arose over who should collect and distribute data on *refuseniks* (Soviet Jews denied permission to emigrate). These questions created conflict between Israel and the Diaspora, between elite and grassroots NGOs and between activists inside and outside of the Soviet Union. The Israeli Liaison Bureau sought to develop a hierarchical strategy, by which the Jerusalem office would gather data from émigrés and then 'assign' a given *refusenik* to a specific country's Jewish NGO, prohibiting other NGOs from campaigning for that *refusenik's* release. The Israelis avoided working with grassroots NGOs like the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, sharing their information only with elite NGOs like the National Conference for Soviet Jewry. Israeli diplomats warned Moscow activists, including Natan Sharansky, several times against sharing information by phone with London schoolteacher Michael Sherbourne for distribution to the grassroots Soviet Jewry network in Western Europe and the United States.<sup>4</sup>

In other words Israel sought to assert control, maintaining that the state was the centrepiece of the global Jewish political process. Israelis were also concerned that after an initial period in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s in which the Jewish emigration movement was led by Zionists seeking to make *aliyah*, Soviet Jews in the 1980s were now opting to go to other places besides Israel (primarily the United States and Germany) by a ratio of two to one. Successive Israeli governments under Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin and Menachem Begin actively sought to discourage these so-called *noshrim*, or dropouts, primarily promoting not the international human right to emigrate, but the right to emigrate to *Israel*.

However, the Israeli approach engendered some opposition in the Diaspora. Some American Jews disagreed with the Zionist focus of the Israelis' efforts and sought to ensure that émigrés would have the freedom to choose their destination. Grassroots organizations did not take kindly to their exclusion from the Israeli information network. And for their part, the Moscow activists complained that Israelis often mocked Soviet Jews in Israel as 'Jewish *goyim*' (gentiles) due to their lack of religious, cultural, and historical knowledge. Many Soviet Jews appreciated the Americans' work on their behalf and wished to immigrate to the US. So while the network succeeded in helping to bring two million Soviet Jews out of the country, its success could not be credited to its internal cohesion.

A similarly illuminating example of the dynamic structure of global Jewish politics occurred in the events leading up

<sup>4</sup> Fred A. Lazin, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry in American Politics: Israel versus the American Jewish Establishment* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005); Stuart Altshuler, *From Exodus to Freedom: The History of the Soviet Jewry Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).



to the Israeli airlift of 14,310 Ethiopian Jews to Israel on 24–25 May 1991. The airlift, named Operation Solomon, has often been cited as an instance of the ingathering of the exiles through cooperation between Israeli officials and Jewish NGOs. But this story is somewhat more harmonious than was actually the case. Because each of the actors had different agendas—even though they were ostensibly working toward the same goal—the road was not always smooth. The Israelis and the American Jews often clashed on goals and tactics. The goals and outlooks of the Israeli officials often differed from those of the *qessotch*, the Ethiopian Jews' spiritual leaders.

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As Stephen Spector has shown in his fascinating book on the airlift, one of the most interesting examples of conflict concerns Susan Pollack, the representative in Addis Ababa of the grassroots and somewhat maverick American Association for Ethiopian Jews.<sup>5</sup> Pollack precipitated the crisis leading to Operation Solomon when, in February 1990, without consulting any government, she arranged to transport the majority of Ethiopian Jews from the remote Gondar province to the capital. Within weeks the Israeli embassy became a refugee camp for thousands of Ethiopian Jews, where hunger, HIV and tuberculosis spread rapidly and the agricultural villagers had to confront the temptations of hard currency, alcohol and prostitution. The Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency were furious with Pollack at the time for bringing the Ethiopians before proper social service accommodations could be provided. Yet while publicly critical of Pollack's unauthorized action, they nonetheless acknowledged privately that she had done precisely what no elite NGO or government agency could have done—create what is called 'a fact on the ground'. Had it not been for her, the evacuation might never have taken place. This story illustrates once again the delicate and fluid structure by which political actors on international Jewish issues have usually operated.

Susan Pollack's story also illustrates how this *unsystematic system*, because of and not in spite of its adversarial qualities, has often worked for Jews' overall benefit. Her action and the other participants' responses may seem to be the idiosyncratic behaviours of a particular group of actors in a specific situation, but in fact they exemplify a typical structure. Moreover, this kind of political system is not only normative for global Jews, but for global politics *per se*, where state and non-state actors operate in an environment in which there are few effective decision-making bodies. The global governance arena is almost always just one step away from anarchy. This is not

only its weakness but its strength: its fluidity provides a *modus operandi* by which bodies with diverse authority structures, missions and capacities can find their way to mutual projects in a multipolar world.

There are, of course, some outstanding instances in which Jewish organizations have made binding agreements, generally between the state of Israel and a non-state Diaspora actor. For example, although the Jewish Agency is a private Diaspora NGO, it served as an embryonic government in the years before Israel's establishment and has had contracts on land acquisition and various other issues with the Israeli government since that time. In a famous correspondence in 1950 between David Ben-Gurion and American Jewish Committee President Jacob Blaustein, the two leaders laid out what each expected of the relationship between Israel and American Jewry, an exchange which has served as a largely binding bilateral framework ever since. In 1991, the World Jewish Congress and Israel signed a memorandum of agreement to form the World Jewish Restitution Organization for the purpose of recovering property stolen by the Nazis. This agreement gave the recovery efforts a high profile and ensured a lasting impact. Such formal agreements are important but exceptional.

### The Israeli human rights network

Israeli domestic activism on behalf of victims of the state's human rights abuses demonstrates the more frequent case of informality, collaboration and conflict. The Israeli human rights network is only about twenty years old, dating principally to some Israelis' resistance against government and Israel Defence Forces practices during the first *intifada* in 1987–89. Israel's human rights NGOs have enjoyed some common sources of funding and have expressed the common aim of helping to strengthen Israeli democracy and the rule of law. However, as in the other cases analysed so far, there have been no permanent alliances. As Jessica Montell, director of B'Tselem, puts it:

these NGOs are 'like sisters.... If we have a legal question, we call [the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, ACRI]. If we are doing a report on a HaMoked issue [HaMoked, or The Hotline, provides casework services to human rights victims], we say why don't we do a joint report? Basically we specialize in research and publication, HaMoked in locating detainees and obtaining necessary permits, ACRI and HaMoked in legal petitions.'<sup>6</sup>

The larger organizations have often also partnered single-issue organizations like the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel. Coalitions have been particularly effective in cases where each NGO's distinct specialization can contribute to a common cause. The high watermark of such cooperation came in preparation for the Supreme Court's landmark decision, in 1999, to prohibit torture in all its forms. Many different NGOs

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Spector, *Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews* (New York: OUP, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Jessica Montell, Executive Director, B'Tselem, Jerusalem, 16 July 2006.

contributed their expertise to building their case, through site monitoring, taking individual testimonies, documenting systematic policies of torture, measuring adverse health outcomes, mounting public advocacy campaigns and preparing legal arguments. The Court asserted that the coalition of Israeli human rights NGOs had provided the persuasive arguments in the case.

But as in the other cases tactical disagreements of Israeli activists have proven integral, not only to the network's failures, but, ironically, also to some of its successes. The disagreement of activists over the question of the West Bank checkpoints provides a fascinating illustration. A 2002 survey found that most Israeli Jews supported the checkpoints as a matter of national security. However, most wanted the IDF to alleviate Palestinian suffering at the checkpoints as much as possible. The public had been sensitized to this issue by several high-profile reports of pregnant Palestinian women who, because of the queues at the checkpoints, had been unable to reach the hospital in time and had given birth in their cars.

Many of the more 'mainstream' human rights NGOs argued that the network should advocate the amelioration of Palestinian suffering at the checkpoints. A number of NGOs objected to this strategy, however. The activists in these organizations argued that amelioration was too partial a solution; it ignored the fact that, from a human rights perspective, the checkpoints themselves are illegal forms of collective punishment. For these NGOs, amelioration muddied the purity of the universal norm. Hence, they chose ideological purity at the cost of being publicly marginalized. Others, however, whom the purists considered too mainstream, chose to prioritize the amelioration issue and were able to convince the IDF to increase access to health care at the checkpoints.

The marginalization of the radical group does not necessarily indicate that it has failed to contribute to the total process of change-making—only that its contribution has been to stake out a pole in the continuum of possible action. The more maverick groups are sometimes willing and able to take action on a given issue when the more mainstream groups will not take the risk of alienating the public, their donors, their staff, the government or the Court. The action of the maverick group then creates a crisis which forces the hands of politicians. Then the splitting of the network into 'radical' and 'mainstream' factions enables the latter's talk of a *compromise* solution to appear reasonable and face-saving to policymakers. The result can be partial or total movement in a given direction, where no movement might have occurred in the absence of the tactical split among the NGOs.

### Managing global Jewish politics in the future

Through these cases we have identified a fluid pattern by which global Jewish politics typically operates, but observing this dynamic raises further sets of questions.

#### *Who sets the global Jewish agenda?*

The first question concerns how issues get on the global Jew-

ish agenda in the first place. To what extent does a given issue emerge because it responds to the expressed consensus of the global Jewish community? And how can such a consensus be identified? Do (or should) NGOs gather evidence of a consensus through polls and surveys, or counting opinion pieces and Letters to the Editor in Jewish newspapers? Alternatively, to what extent are issues driven by narrower, less representative interest groups, such as donors, NGO constituents, or staff? Finally, how can global Jewry distinguish those issues to be addressed through global coalitions from those which might be better left to specialized organizations?

#### *Does the decision-making process still work?*

The second question involves the decision-making process through which agenda items are addressed. I have suggested that the informal organizational structure of global Jewish politics bears a particular historical pedigree dating to the Enlightenment. Is this structure still adequate for us? The current structure rewards reactive crisis amelioration rather than proactive priority-setting. Should there, *can* there, be a more coordinated strategic planning process? To take a regional rather than global case, should European Jewry focus on organizing itself through a regional executive that could be empowered to speak for European Jews on certain common denominator issues? On which issues can Israel function as the centre of the global Jewish decision-making process? What organizational expression does our historical moment require?

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#### *What issues need collective action?*

Assuming there is a system in place for determining the global Jewish political agenda and structuring a decision-making process, we can then turn to the third question, the substance of the agenda items. Are there specific types of issues on which global Jews need to work collectively? I have already touched on several categories:

- (1) The need to resolve Holocaust remainder issues, such as aid to refugees and asylum-seekers, recovery of stolen property, and bringing perpetrators to justice;
- (2) Diaspora Jews' ongoing support and defence of Israel against its critics and enemies;
- (3) aiding Jews in peril and repairing their devastated communities;
- (4) aiding non-Jews in peril in accordance with Jewish religious and/or historical values; and
- (5) working to counter resurgent antisemitism. What, if any, are other, newly emerging issues that global Jewish politics ought to address?

### A buzzing hive—robust and healthy

I began by asserting that global Jews' voluntary and dynamic political structure is a product of their entrance into modern citizenship two hundred years ago. But in a sense this structure has to be back-dated further—much further. It was, after all, Jacob who blessed his twelve sons, each in his own distinct manner, and the twelve tribes that grew from them were likewise independent and distinct. While Jews stood together at the foot of Sinai and chanted in one voice, 'we will do and we will hear,' their camp site was organized by *tribe*, and that very same day each group returned to its tents on its own side of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). The differences among the Benjaminites and the rest of the Israelites in the Book of Judges demonstrate the built-in tension between the unity of the people and the smaller unities within the greater one. This motion picture should not give us pause, however. Instead, our busy, buzzing hive of associations should be seen as a sign of the robust health of global Jewish civil society. Those of us who hope to influence Jewish public policy need first of all to understand how the Jewish people *works*.

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